

Officials release Air Force Wounded Warrior Survey key results

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In 2011, RAND Project Air Force surveyed Airmen enrolled in the Air Force Wounded Warrior program to assess how they were using U.S. Air Force support services, and to understand their needs, including for mental health and employment. Out of 872 enrollees, 459 responded: 127 active-duty Airmen, 48 Guard and Reserve Airmen, and 284 retirees.

The majority of Airmen from all three groups who used support services reported a high level of overall satisfaction with them. The majority, 95 percent, had received at least one service from the Air Force Wounded Warrior program; 20 percent used the more recently implemented Recovery Care Coordinator program.

Major depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder affect all three groups. About 80 percent of respondents reported symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of MDD or PTSD. As many injuries in the sample are psychological in nature, these findings are not surprising. Overall, reserve component and retired Airmen were affected more than active-duty wounded warriors by both disorders. More recent retirees had higher odds of screening positive for PTSD.

Mental health needs were unmet at times. Most wounded warriors received some mental health treatment in the past year, but more than 40 percent of respondents reported that they did not get the care needed for mental health concerns at some point in the prior year. Commonly perceived barriers were appointment scheduling difficulties and confidentiality concerns, though the treatment setting of these experiences was unclear.

Many prefer mental health care from civilian providers. If cost were not an issue, 51 percent of respondents suggested they would prefer civilian provider care rather than one from Veteran Affairs or a military treatment facility. Airmen who were concerned about confidentiality and who were on active duty rather than retired had higher odds of preferring civilian providers.

Employment concerns were common. Many Airmen who were disabled and not working or looking for work were concerned their disability posed an employment barrier; many also worried they lacked the qualifications, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in civilian work.

Based on these findings, we recommend that the Department of Defense and VA take the following actions:

- Have AFW2 care managers help Airmen and retirees schedule appointments with mental health care providers.
- Emphasize and enhance confidential mental health treatment options for all Airmen.
- Educate all Airmen and retirees on what high-quality mental health treatment looks like (treatment protocols, evidence-based treatments) and where it can be found.

- Offer employment assistance focused on the transition of individual skill sets to new contexts.

- Assess ongoing Air Force programs to measure the effect of changes in support services.

In response to our recommendations, the Air Force is doing the following:

- Partnering with Penn State on a pilot evaluation to assess the quality of mental health treatment and processes.

- Developing a robust system for flagging appointment delays.

- Using the findings from this study to advocate for more mental health care support.

- Devoting resources to tailored employment assistance.

- Partnering with the Office of the Secretary of Defense on its Education and Employment Initiative and Operation Warfighter to improve access to education and employment opportunities.

- Exploring and eliminating redundancies in nonmedical care management and encouraging an integrated, cohesive team approach to wounded warrior care through the new Warrior and Survivor Care division.

In response to the survey and its findings, the Air Force wants to learn more about how best to provide the services wounded warriors deserve and need. We hope wounded warriors will talk with us again if contacted for the second wave of the survey.